



# Hardline on hardscape

BY VICKY POULSEN

## Three landscape company managers talk about the risks and rewards of installing hardscaping

**H**ardscaping done right can be a landscape professional's signature mark, especially in high-end residential and commercial markets where price isn't a huge factor. Those contractors who can "deliver the goods" at the price promised are a hot commodity.

Whether it be a simple brick-edge design to showcase a flowerbed or an elaborate, natural-looking stone wall nestled around a koi-filled pond, it seems like everyone these days wants to add a feature to their outdoor space. Consumers are hungry for products and materials similar to the ones they see on HGTV (Home and Garden Television). The astute contractor will find a way to feed their insatiable appetite with appealing designs that will make their homes stand out.

Unlike plant installations, hardscapes carry huge financial risks. Retaining walls that fail and pavers that crack cost contrac-

▲ PHOTO COURTESY YARDMASTER, INC.

tors thousands of dollars to redo. Whether the installer or the manufacturer is to blame, the results can be disastrous to a contractor's reputation.

The rewards for properly installed hardscaping are big, though. To get an idea of how others have succeeded in this field, we asked three contractors from across the country to lay out their blueprints for hardscape project success. Here's what they had to say:

### LARGE CONTRACTOR

**Name:** Kurt Kluznik, CCLP

**Title:** President

**Company:** Yardmaster, Inc.

**Location:** Painesville, OH

**2000 revenues:** \$9 million

**Business mix:** 50% residential, 50% commercial

**Employees:** 250

**Company profile:** Started business in 1971. Has three locations in Cleveland area, one in Columbus and another in Detroit. Operates 50 to 60 crews of up to six members



a team, depending on the job. More than half of the design/build services the company provides are devoted to hardscapes (i.e. water features, walls, patios, walks, arbors, fences, gazebos, pools, etc.).

**Product picks:** "We buy a lot of stone from manufacturers and from quarries in Ohio and Pennsylvania. We also use a lot of the Unilock products." Wood, liners, filters, pumps, outdoor lighting and irrigation supplies also top their product list.

**Design stage:** "We have landscape architects on staff who do our design work. Through their interview process with our clients, we get a feel for what our clients like and what will work well with the site. We try to pick up colors and textures that already exist on the site and match those styles or properties with the products we'll be using. I think more people are being exposed to creative and functional landscape design, and that exposure is driving the market.

"We also have a studio loaded with photos portraying samples of our work and pallets of materials and styles, so when customers visit they actually pull a photo or material from our display board and find exactly what suits their tastes. It also exposes clients to other hardscape possibilities they weren't looking for when they first came in."

**Profit tips:** "We get our budget clues from the types of homes our customers own. We also have an excellent estimating process that develops the most cost-effective budget for each project."

**Extra help:** "We subcontract some of our work (even some design work) to meet the 'seasonability' or demands at the time. We'll also use subs who worked for us at one time but now have their own design or construction businesses."

**Words of wisdom:** "Hardscaping is a lot of fun because it allows you to get creative. However, there are lots of risks involved. If you build a wall and it falls, or if a patio doesn't drain right and you have to redo it, it can cost you \$100,000. It takes a lot of experience. Plus, there's a lot of non-billable time that's involved before you set foot on the site. If you don't estimate that time, it can be a nightmare."

## MEDIUM CONTRACTOR

**Name:** Mike Wheat  
**Title:** Owner  
**Company:** Wheat's Lawn & Custom Landscape  
**Location:** Vienna, VA  
**2000 revenues:** \$6.7 million  
**Business mix:** Mostly residential  
**Employees:** 80 off-season/90 peak season  
**Company profile:** Started in 1978, the company serves high-end residential ac-



counts. Service mix includes 30% design/build, 55% maintenance and 15% turf and tree/shrub care. Of design/build services, 25% is devoted to hardscape. Also employs a mason. Specific hardscape services include pavers, retaining walls, benches, arbors and gazebos. Operates two- to three-man crews; number of crews depends on the job.

**Product picks:** "We look for quality products with great manufacturer and dealer support. That's critical to us."

**Design stage:** "We have landscape architects and designers on staff."

**Profit tips:** "We interview our clients to learn what their wants and needs are, and then we present various options to them based on what they tell us. We're in a high-income area, so price really isn't an issue."

**Extra help:** "We do everything in-house. We subcontract some electrical work."

**Words of wisdom:** "Be selective with clients, and make sure you price accurately. We're not in it to make a quick buck. We're in it for the long-term relationship with our customer. Our customer service is second-to-none, and that's key to our success."

## SMALL CONTRACTOR

**Name:** Michael Becker  
**Title:** Co-owner  
**Company:** Estate Gardeners, Inc.  
**Location:** Omaha, NE  
**2000 revenues:** \$470,000  
**Business mix:** Mostly residential  
**Employees:** 15  
**Company profile:** Estate Gardeners, Inc. was established in 1993. Landscape design/build installation work amounts to 80% of the services they provide, with the remaining 20% devoted to garden maintenance. Operates three-person crews devoted to both installation and maintenance. "In our area, we have the highest percentage per capita of millionaires. We have one customer who hired us to install

two 10,000 sq. ft. lakes, the cost of which will equal our total sales of last year."

**Product picks:** "When purchasing products for our hardscape projects, I'm looking for quality and appearance. I can't use a highly durable product if it doesn't look good. Looks and durability have to go hand-in-hand. If I'm doing segmental concrete retaining walls, I want blocks I can break for corners. With pavers, I'm looking for a variety of colors and shapes. Unfortunately, I think these man-made walls lack the soul of natural products, but they're effective for what they're made to do. You can't

beat these walls when it comes to strength. And we do incorporate natural materials such as moss rock boulders and rubble stones when we can."

**Design stage:** "We do our own landscape designs with the help of a computer software program. We also charge for our landscape designs, and make that clear when we meet with clients. At the end of the design process, the customer can keep the design and do what they want with it."

**Profit tips:** "Before we plan designs for customers, we want to know their budget

"Educate yourself about the materials and processes of installing them properly by talking with your suppliers. Never cut corners. Follow the manufacturers' suggestions.

constraints and ultimate goals for the entire site. From there, we develop a master plan and begin to inventory their favorite colors, garden preference such as an Italian or French design, and lifestyle needs. Communication is key to our success. We listen to our customers as well as educate them. Many times, they've never worked with a design/build firm and don't know what to expect. They want a nice garden, but they don't know how it comes together."

**Extra help:** "A good network of subcontractors is key in keeping ahead of a project. However, any communications go through us first. We're the ones our customers go to if they have a question or concern. This gives us control over the entire project."

**Words of wisdom:** "Educate yourself about the materials and processes of installing them properly by talking with your suppliers. Never cut corners. Follow the manufacturers' suggestions. Like your lawn chemicals, always read the labels first. Unlike landscape work, hardscape work can cost you thousands of dollars if something goes wrong." **LM**



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# All natural

## Manufacturers talk about the increasing demand for natural-looking hardscape products

BY VICKY POULSEN

Natural products seem to be all the rage when it comes to hardscape. But since they can't always be used to create the desired look, manufacturers offer synthetic products that can withstand tough weather conditions and look as beautiful as the real thing.

As a result of watching home improvement projects on television and visiting large retail home outlet stores, consumers today are more savvy. They demand innovative design, expert workmanship and quality products. They also look for outdoor products that reflect their lifestyle and the personality of their home.

Many consumers consider their yard a natural extension of their living space, and that probably explains why there's been an explosive growth in patio, pond, gazebo, terrace and deck sales.

We went to product manufacturers and asked them what the hottest items in the hardscape market are today. Here's what they had to say:

**Bomanite, Madera, CA**  
559/673-2411

Chris Stewart, Vice President/Technical Services

**Hardscape products:** Colored, textured and imprinted architectural concrete paving.

**Key trends:** "Consumers are looking for textures and colors that highlight patterns and achieve an antiquing effect. Some patterns vary from formal to abstract patterns to non-repetitive stone slate-type material that can also be combined with different textures to create a different look or accent different design areas."

The Bomanite process begins with a concrete mix poured into forms to create a monolithic slab. After initial floating, a dry-shake color hardener is hand cast evenly across the plastic surface of the wet concrete, then uniformly floated into the surface. A second shake of color is applied, then the surface is re-floated.

**These pavers from Bomanite achieve an antiquing effect.**

When textured tools are going to be used, a release agent is applied across the colored concrete's surface. The next step is

the imprinting phase, then the sealer when the concrete is well-cured."

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Versa-Lok's retaining walls provide an attractive, random appearance.

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**Best features:** "The sealing process prevents moisture penetration and protects the color. Monolithic construction eliminates loose or "turned up" paving materials. Bomanite has greater durability and structural strength of its plain gray counterpart and can take on the color, texture and pattern of other materials."

**Curv-Rite, Wayland, MI**  
800/366-2878

John Mindling, Director of Sales

**Hardscape products:** Aluminum landscape edging and paver restraints.

**Key trends:** "In today's market, there seems to be a movement toward more natural landscapes. Contractors are installing flower beds that have softer lines. Long, sweeping

curves have replaced hard, formal rectangular bed shapes. People also seem to want new landscape installations to look as if they've been in place for years.

We've found that contractors are looking for landscape edging that's easy to install, flexible enough to incorporate curvilinear designs, and strong enough to maintain straight-aways. They also want edging that maintains their bed design edges but doesn't draw attention to itself, and they want it to stand up to abuse from professional maintenance equipment."

**Best features:** "Curv-Rite was started with the intent of making a safe, easy-to-install landscape edging product. We chose to make the product out of aluminum because of its unique properties. Aluminum is a renewable resource that's

lightweight yet extremely durable; won't rust like steel or rot like wood; impervious to heat and won't crack in the cold; and has the ability to be flexed into many shapes.

"Our telescoping design runs through the entire section of edging, eliminating waste and speeding up the installation process. This connection eliminates the need for separate connector pieces to join sections together. You also don't lose the ability to connect sections together if you cut a section in half. The profile of our landscape edging is symmetrical, which means it cannot be installed upside down."

**Master-Halco,**  
**La Habra, CA**

562/694-5066

Michael Lindsey, Marketing Manager

**Hardscape products:** Offers a variety of fence solutions, from chain-link to wood fencing, ornamental iron to vinyl.

**Key trends:** "We're seeing an accelerated growth in PVC (vinyl) fencing primarily because it's low maintenance. You never have to worry about painting, rotting, warping, termites, corrosion or rust. When you consider the benefits of vinyl, it's a cost-effective solution in the long run. Wood has also peaked in price lately, where the cost for vinyl has de-

creased in recent months as it becomes more mainstream."

**Best features:** "Ease-of-installation is an important factor to our installers. Our products are designed to be user-friendly and aesthetically-pleasing. A complicated installation can cost a contractor time and money. Our fence systems are engineered to reduce installation mistakes.

"For example, our Monumental Iron Works fence is a modular system made up of many component parts designed to support each other. Using industrial rivets, the constructed panels have the solid look and feel of authentic ornamental iron."

**Permaloc Corp.,**  
**Holland, MI**

800/356-9660

Bob Anderson, Director of Sales and Marketing

**Hardscape products:** Aluminum edging.

**Key trends:** "The addition of elaborate and complex bedding designs using aluminum landscape edging, brick pavers and increased amounts of decorative stone is the hot trend."

**Best features:** "The vertical grade changes and curvilinear demands incorporated into these new residential designs require the installer to use professional grade products such as

aluminum landscape edging and paver restraints to achieve long-term integrity."

**Versa-Lok Retaining Wall Systems, Oakdale, MN**  
800/770-4525

Matt Singer, National Sales Manager

**Hardscape products:** Segmental retaining wall systems.

**Key trends:** "Landscape professionals are seeking more natural-looking products like our weathered Accent segment and Mosaic retaining wall systems which provide an at-

tractive, random appearance. Our weathered concrete units undergo a tumbling process to create rustic, old world character. We carefully blend specific colors to give our products a more natural look. For example, in the midwest, we can dye our block with a brown/tan blend to fit the aesthetic needs of that region. Because they're integrally-colored, units may be split or modified without loss of color. Our concrete SRW units can create beautiful hardscapes such as planters, staircases, columns, free-standing walls, concrete patios and large retaining walls."

**Best features:** "Our concrete segmental units offer unlimited design capabilities. Solid units are so versatile that curves, corners, steps and columns can be made using only one block. By sawing or splitting solid units, structurally stable corners ranging from 25-degree outside corners to 140-degree inside corners can be built. With all our products, no mortar or concrete footings are required."

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# HARDSCAPE *products*



## Chip off the old block

Presto's Geoblock porous pavement system is a series of interlocking blocks designed to offer turf protection and load support in areas used by heavy vehicles. The blocks create a flexible structural bridge system within the topsoil layer to support and distribute concentrated loads. For more information contact Presto at 800/548-3424 / Circle no. 273

## Paving the way

Bomanite Corporation offers a variety of colored, textured and imprinted architectural concrete paving. The company offers 100 patterns and 25 colors in textures such as slate, granite, limestone, sandstone, cobblestone and used brick. Also offered are two types of imprinting tools for smooth surfaces (such as tile or brick patterns) and natural textured surfaces (such as granite or wood patterns). For more information contact Bomanite at 559/673-2411 or [www.bomanite.com](http://www.bomanite.com) / Circle no. 272



## Edging along

PermaLoc Corporation's CleanLine aluminum landscape bed edging is easy to install and available in 1/8- or 3/16-in. thickness by 3-, 4- or 5-1/2-in. depth. Finishes include mill (natural aluminum), black duraflex (electrostatically applied, baked on paint) and black anodized. Heavy aluminum stakes lock on to the



edging and anchor it into the ground. An interlocking snap-down connection eliminates possible weak points in the system. For more information contact PermaLoc at 800/356-9660 / Circle no. 274

## Go mosaic

Versa-Lok's mosaic retaining wall system provides an attractive, random appearance while maintaining installation simplicity and durability. Mosaic walls use three solid concrete units of varying heights and widths to



achieve a complicated yet classic appearance. The split face of each unit blends well into any natural or architectural environment. For more information contact Versa-Lok at 800/770-4525 or [www.versa-lok.com](http://www.versa-lok.com) / Circle no. 275

## Nice curves

Curv-Rite's aluminum edging system is available in two different thicknesses — 1/8-in. and 3/16-in. — and is available in mill finish, deco-black, deco-bronze, deco-green or black anodize. Its telescoping design runs through the entire section of edging, eliminating waste and speeding up installation. For more information contact Curv-Rite at 800/366-2878 / Circle no. 276